

III. LESSON 3 – A Brief History of Coffee

Topic: Coffee history, slavery, colonial context

Time: 50 minutes

Curriculum Content Area Standards: Language Arts, Geography, World History

Overview: Students will begin to learn about the history of coffee, from Ethiopia to Europe, the Caribbean to the USA. Students will explore how coffee came to be so important for so many people around the world.

Objectives: By the end of the lesson, students will be able to explain:

- *The path of coffee through history*
- *The colonial context and the slave trade as part of the reason why coffee was profitable as a cash crop*
- *Relate coffee to other crops they may have learned about in the context of slavery (sugar, cotton)*

Assessment: participation in class discussion, illustrated mapping exercise

Rationale: The history of coffee shows that ‘globalization’ has been under way in many ways for hundreds of years as trade in natural resources have led to physical flows of people and materials worldwide. To better understand today’s injustice in the coffee trade, it is helpful to gain a background in the historic context of coffee cultivation as it spread in the colonial period, in many places made possible largely through the labor of slaves.

Materials: Handout (*Handout 3: The Story of Coffee*), world map, globe or atlas, journals

Learning Activities: 1) Reading: The Story of Coffee 2) Slavery and the Colonial Context 3) Discussion and Intro to Group Assignment

Intro: Let’s recall all the places in the world that grow coffee (from the previous lesson). Where did coffee come from originally? How did it spread around the world? In this section, we will explore how coffee came to be so important for so many people around the world.

Part 1: Reading – The Story of Coffee (15 min)

Give students 10 minutes to read *Handout 3: The Story of Coffee*. Tell them to keep an eye out for (they may want to highlight or underline) names of places in the text and routes of travel.

Handout 3: The Story of Coffee

(From the ICO website at http://www.ico.org/coffee_story.asp)

The story of how coffee growing and drinking spread around the world is one of the greatest and most romantic in history. It starts in the Horn of Africa, in Ethiopia, where the coffee tree probably originated in the province of Kaffa. There are various fanciful but unlikely stories surrounding the discovery of the properties of roasted coffee beans. One story has it that an Ethiopian goatherd was amazed at the lively behavior of his goats after chewing red coffee berries. What we know with more certainty is that the succulent outer cherry flesh was eaten by slaves taken from present day Sudan into Yemen and Arabia, through the great port of its day, Mocha, now synonymous with coffee. Coffee was certainly being cultivated in Yemen by the 15th century and probably much earlier than that.

Mocha was also the main port for the one sea route to Mecca, and was the busiest place in the world at the time. But the Arabs had a strict policy not to export any fertile beans, so that coffee could not be cultivated anywhere else. The coffee bean is the seed of the coffee tree, but when stripped of its outer layers it becomes infertile. The race to make off with some live coffee trees or beans was eventually won by the Dutch in 1616, who brought some back to Holland where they were grown in greenhouses.

Initially, the authorities in Yemen actively encouraged coffee drinking as it was considered preferable to the extreme side effects of *Kat*, a shrub whose buds and leaves were chewed as a stimulant. The first coffeehouses were opened in Mecca and were called 'kaveh kanes'. They quickly spread throughout the Arab world and became successful places where chess was played, gossip was exchanged, and singing, dancing and music were enjoyed. They were luxuriously decorated and each had an individual character. Nothing quite like the coffeehouse had existed before: a place where society and business could be conducted in comfortable surroundings and where anyone could go, for the price of coffee.

The Arabian coffeehouses soon became centers of political activity and were suppressed. Coffee and coffeehouses were subsequently banned several times over the next few decades, but they kept reappearing. Eventually a solution was found when coffeehouses and coffee were taxed.

COFFEE COMES TO ASIA

The Dutch were also growing coffee at Malabar in India, and in 1699 took some to Batavia in Java, in what is now Indonesia. Within a few years the Dutch colonies had become the main suppliers of coffee to Europe. Today Indonesia is the fourth largest exporter of coffee in the world.

COFFEE COMES TO EUROPE

Venetian traders first brought coffee to Europe in 1615. This was a period when the two other great hot beverages also appeared in Europe. Hot chocolate was the first, brought by the Spanish from the Americas to Spain in 1528; and tea, which was first sold in Europe in 1610.

At first coffee was mainly sold by lemonade vendors and was believed to have medicinal qualities. The first European coffeehouse opened in Venice in 1683, with the most famous, Caffe Florian in Piazza San Marco, opening in 1720. It is still open for business today.

The largest insurance market in the world, Lloyd's of London, began life as a coffeehouse. It was started in 1688 by Edward Lloyd, who prepared lists of the ships that his customers had insured.

COFFEE COMES TO THE AMERICAS

The first reference to coffee being drunk in North America is from 1668 and, soon after, coffee houses were established in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other towns. The Boston Tea Party Of 1773 was planned in a coffee house, the Green Dragon. Both the New York Stock Exchange and the Bank of New York started in coffeehouses, in what is today the financial district known as Wall Street.

It was in the 1720s that coffee first came to be cultivated in the Americas, through what is perhaps the most fascinating and romantic story in the history of coffee. Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu was a French naval officer serving in Martinique who in 1720, went to Paris on leave. With assistance and no little personal charm he acquired a coffee tree which he took with him on the ship back. The plant was kept in a glass case on deck to keep it warm and prevent damage from salt water. The journey was eventful, or at least Mr. Mathieu de Clieu's journal of the voyage was. Pirates from Tunis threatened the ship, there was a violent storm and the plant had to be tied down. Our hero faced an enemy on board who was jealous and tried to sabotage the plant. There was a violent struggle in which a branch was torn off, but the plant survived this horror.

Then the ship was becalmed and drinking water was rationed. De Clieu had his priorities right and gave most of his allowance of precious water to the coffee plant. It survived, as did he.

Finally, the ship arrived in Martinique and the coffee tree was re-planted at Preebear, where it was surrounded by a thorn hedge and watched over by slaves. It grew, and multiplied, and by 1726 the first harvest was ready. It is recorded that by 1777, there were between 18 and 19 million coffee trees on Martinique, and the model for a new cash crop that could be grown in the New World was in place.

But it was the Dutch who first started the spread of the coffee plant in Central and South America, where today it reigns supreme as the main continental cash crop. Coffee first arrived in the Dutch colony of Surinam in 1718, to be followed by plantations in French Guyana and the first of many in Brazil at Para. In 1730 the British introduced coffee to Jamaica, where today the most famous and expensive coffee in the world is grown in the Blue Mountains. By 1825, South and Central America were on track towards their coffee destiny. That date is also important as it was when coffee was first planted in Hawaii, the only state in the US which produces coffee, and one of the finest.

Part 1, continued:

Class Discussion

1. Re-examine the first line from *The Story of Coffee*:

The story of how coffee growing and drinking spread around the world is one of the greatest and most romantic in history.

Contrast that statement with the following, by another source:

The history of coffee is tainted by 'poverty, violence, exploitation, environmental devastation, political oppression, and corruption.'

(Antony Wild, from his book Coffee: A Dark History)

- 2) To what do students think this second statement refers?

Part 2: Coffee, Colonial Context, and Slavery: Another Side of the Story (25 min)

Explain that what is not highlighted in this article is why plantations often were so profitable. Ask students to consider the time period. What did the world look like (especially Americas, Asia, and Africa) from 1600s to late 1800s? How was it divided? How might this explain the second statement? (Colonial context and slavery in Americas meant that many plantations were run by slave labor, or slave plantation conditions were imposed on laborers even after slavery was abolished, when the primary labor force was former slaves. Ex. Dutch in Indonesia, French in Martinique, British in Jamaica, Portuguese in Brazil.)

- 3) **Pass out Handout 4: Coffee, Slavery, and Colonial History. Read the two excerpts.** How does this contrast with *The Story of Coffee*?
- 4) There are many ways to talk about history, to retell a story. This is an example of two contrasting stories about the same topic. Does this sound similar to the different ways we learn and read about colonial history in the US? How does the early coffee trade compare with stories of slavery on cotton and sugar plantations in the US and the Caribbean? Is this part of the history of coffee surprising to students?

*****HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: An Illustrated Map of Coffee History*****

- Make an illustrated and annotated map with a timeline showing the path of the coffee bean from Ethiopia to the USA through history.

OR

- **Group Assignment:** Research in detail the role of coffee in the history of one of the countries mentioned in the text.

Handout 4: Coffee, Slavery, and Colonial History**Excerpt 1:**

Under the control of a handful of colonial powers beginning in the early 1700s, coffee cultivation increased dramatically throughout the tropics over the ensuing centuries. For most European colonial powers, coffee was a dream crop: a habit forming, high-value tropical product that travels well, with a ready market in Europe. Accompanying its expansion was a litany of cruelly inhumane and rapacious practices used for cultivating the bean, practices that indelibly scarred the landscapes and peoples unfortunate enough to be associated with the crop. Massive forest clearing and slavery were the seeming requisites behind growing coffee in virgin colonial lands, and the forces unleashed in this process have not yet played themselves out... [...]

Coffee production assumed a significant role in early colonialism as most of the major colonial powers became players: the Dutch cultivated coffee in Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Timor, and later, Celebes and Dutch Guiana (Suriname); the English grew coffee in the Caribbean and, later, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and India; the French planted coffee in the Caribbean, South America, and later, in its colonies in Africa; the Portuguese produced coffee in Brazil, parts of Indonesia, and eventually in their colonies in Africa.”

From Dicum and Luttinger, The Coffee Book: Anatomy of an industry from crop to the last drop. New York: New Press, 1999; p. 26.

Excerpt 2: *However much the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French might have been at odds with each other over the parceling up of their foreign territories, they were to the same degree united on one particular point, namely on the creation of cheap labor from Black Africa – in short, the slave trade. Regardless of whether settlement or exploitation was the main aim in setting up a colony, labor on the coffee plantations coerced into forced labor. The extremes of exploitation of the workers, and the immeasurably cruel and inhumane treatment meted out to them resulted in repeated outbreaks of unrest and rebellion, which were brutally suppressed by the plantation owners.*

From Heise, Ulla. Coffee and Coffeeshouses. Translated by Paul Roper. Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1987.

How do these excerpts contrast with *The Story of Coffee (Handout 3)*?

Write your response below, or on the back of this sheet.